

French Officials May Ban Protests in Tourist Areas After Violent Yellow Vest March

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Body

PARIS -- French officials said on Tuesday that they would ban potentially violent protests in key areas like the Champs-Élysées in Paris, following a surge of violence during Yellow Vest demonstrations over the weekend that led to intense criticism of the government's handling of security around tourist neighborhoods and wealthier areas.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe said in a televised statement from Paris that after "intolerable" events over the weekend, the government had decided to ban any future Yellow Vest demonstrations "in the areas that have been most targeted," if authorities became aware of "extremist elements" that intended to vandalize.

Mr. Philippe said one of those areas would be the Champs-Élysées, a major avenue in western Paris with luxury stores and tourist attractions that has become a focal point for the protests.

On Saturday, "breakers," or casseurs, smashed an upscale restaurant, looted 27 stores and set kiosks and a bank on fire, forcing firefighters to evacuate a mother and her baby who were trapped on the building's second floor.

The government said 10,000 Yellow Vest protesters had marched in Paris, including 1,500 "ultraviolent" activists.

Such a surge in violence also caught by surprise the managers of the dozens of boutiques dotting the Champs-Élysées, who had dropped their guard after recent weekends when violence had decreased. On Monday, many shops were still boarded, while glass windows were being replaced in others.

But critics argued that it was the government that had dropped its guard, lashing out at Interior Minister Christophe Castaner for skimping on security resources.

"We should be able to handle a situation like the one we've experienced," said Paris's left-wing mayor, Anne Hidalgo. "I'm expecting explanations from the government," she added.

In a sign of the government's effort to address the criticism, Mr. Philippe said that the head of the Paris police, Michel Delpuech, who has been under fire, would be replaced this week.

Although the main Yellow Vest demonstration was dwarfed by other "marches for climate and social justice" that gathered 36,000 protesters in Paris and more than 145,000 throughout France on the same day, the damage in Paris still dominated Monday's news cycle.

Mr. Philippe argued that those who committed violence were not protesters but rioters, whose unique intention was to "loot, set on fire, destroy and hurt."

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Mr. Philippe acknowledged that a new law-enforcement strategy put into place after the first violent protests had not been "correctly executed," with "dysfunctions" in several areas.

In December, after weeks of increasingly violent demonstrations, security forces adopted a more flexible strategy, to try to quickly stop and apprehend rioters. On Saturday, the police arrested 237 protesters and took 144 of them into custody, compared with 1,100 arrests on Dec. 8, on the first weekend the new strategy was used.

The controversy over the use of rubber bullet launchers, nonlethal weapons that have caused dozens of facial injuries, forced police forces to reduce their use, Mr. Philippe said, hinting that the police would be allowed to adopt tougher measures.

He announced that the police would use drones, special products to mark rioters and video surveillance to arrest them. In addition to Paris, Mr. Philippe also mentioned squares in Bordeaux and Toulouse where protests might be banned.

A contentious law passed this past week by senators, which allows administrative rather than judiciary authorities throughout France to ban protests, will not go into effect until a review by the country's constitutional council. Mr. Philippe said the law would help prevent masked rioters from gaining access to demonstration areas.

The Yellow Vest protests had tapered off in recent weeks, and several key figures announced that they would stop demonstrating. But the movement has maintained a continuous presence for 18 consecutive Saturdays, with violence seen by many as the only way to make sure their voices are heard.

President Emmanuel Macron has tried to stanch the protesters' anger through what was known as the "Great National Debate," 11 meetings throughout France that ended last week. But a majority of Yellow Vests have spurned the initiative.

On Monday, Mr. Macron received more than 60 intellectuals to discuss what would come after the "Great National Debate." The government is expected by April to announce the first measures to emerge from that debate.

After a trip to East Africa last week, Mr. Macron went to the Pyrénées for a weekend ski holiday, which he shortened to address the violence. Many protesters complained that even a brief ski trip was an unseemly show of economic privilege in a time of popular hardship.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/world/europe/yellow-vest-protests-france.html>

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